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"THINGS THAT HAVE HELPED US UP THE HUMAN WAY."

II. "SOMETHING TO THINK."

A SERMON

BY

JOHN MALICK

PULPIT
FIRST UNITARIAN CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH OF CINCINNATI.

REV. GEORGE A. THAYER, D.D., *Pastor Emeritus.*
REV. JOHN MALICK, *Minister.*

Reading Road and Linton.
1922.

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"SOMETHING TO THINK."

Being the second in a series of three sermons, on

"THINGS THAT HAVE HELPED US UP THE HUMAN WAY."

I "SOMETHING TO DO—WORK."

II "SOMETHING TO THINK."

III "SOME PLACE APART—PRIVACY."

"THINGS THAT HAVE HELPED US UP THE HUMAN WAY."

II. "SOMETHING TO THINK."

WE are thinking of some of the old, persistent, slowly urging forces of human history that have pushed us on. We have noted already the contribution of work to race upbuilding. If we were right in our facts, work has been a great tamer and humanizer. Through it animal vigor was worked off and domesticated to the point of self-control, which made a condition for the first moral code. If we were right in our conclusions, work is of great concern to us now as a human regulator as well as a means of production. A workless world, men exempt from work's necessity, we found not a goal that we seek but a condition to which we revert. A chronic leisure class is a stage from which we are getting away.

Man is a thinking being in the same sense that he is a working being, in the sense that he has something to think with, as he has something to work with. Thinking, however, is an acquisition, as working is. There is a vagrant strain, a disposition to be mentally inert as there is to be physically inactive. As we go back to, and are getting away from, a workless world, so, we go back to, and are getting away from, an almost thoughtless world.

Work was a necessity from the beginning and the urge of life drove men to activity to sustain life. The taming, civilizing effect came as a by-product of the necessity. We can understand how men got into the work habit and got what it has to give of benefit. The same necessity was not upon them to get into the thinking habit, and they did not. Work was a life necessity and thinking was not to the same degree. All of these thousands of other beings live in the world and get along without thinking. Some of them are larger, swifter, keener-eyed, longer-lived, and more than a match for man. Men can live without much thinking and most of the human race has lived most of its time here with the minimum of thinking. Those who have gone into such matters believe that for the long history of man in point of time, the thinking was about up to that of a quick-minded five year old child with us. Only the simplest, immediate situations could be understood. Anything very complex or remote was beyond the range. Perhaps the moon and the stars were hardly noticed. It is only in very recent years that we have discovered just how little thinking is done, whether from incapacity or indisposition. Until the time within the memory of those sitting here, thinking beings were divided into just three groups: idiots, geniuses, and all others in one class between. The simple, non-competitive occupations of primitive life and rural communities did not require very much thinking and just how little thinking was being done, or could be done, was not revealed.

One can work alone. One can think alone. Men could have learned to think by turning over the contents of their own minds. Most of the human race have not learned to think this way. Most of the thinking of the world has not been done by each one working alone on what the contents of his own mind gave him to think about. Most of the exercise in thinking for the human race, we doubt not, has been done by trying to make the mind follow along where some one has gone before and led the way.

Of course, everyone would like to be able to make his own mind go as far as any mind and not have to follow anyone, but the common human experience is that we do not get very far, or get very much strenuous effort, or benefit, by just turning over the contents of our minds. Our little private mental excursions may not send us very far or give us enough exercise to stiffen up our mental fibre very much. We do have educational theories about everyone getting it all out of his own mind, not following after any one in his thinking. This is largely a theory. Most people do not get very far this way. Almost all the thinking that has been done ever by the human race, and most of the strength that has come from that thinking, have come from trying to think after some more fertile mind.

Here was a great difficulty. Men could not think very far without being led. There was no way for lesser minds to think after better minds in

the early world. The greatest minds could not lead more than could come within the sound of their voices. Man as a thinking being could not get along very rapidly, and could not be pulled along by the strong minds, until the art of writing and making copies came. Then the few leading minds could indicate what they had thought and every man could have the directions and try to make his mind go over the same course. The art of writing and reading, by necessity, made the great day in lifting the race in thinking. Then, what one could not get out of his own mind, to exercise and nimble up his wits on, he could get out of the better minds. With these copies, one strong mind could be permanently present to lead many minds in many places. There was only one at first for each city; then one for each university and then for each community. Now, we are getting a copy for each home and each individual. This simple device of putting down what one mind has been over, so that another can follow along and have his mind do the same, this has been a humanizer and civilizer of immeasurable worth. Wherever these copies, of what the greatest have thought, have gone, men have made very notable gain in thinking and have been modified and advanced. Wherever men have been denied the privilege of following after these leading minds and have had to turn into their own minds only, here not very much thinking has deen done and life has not moved up very much. We do seem to have here in this opportunity to make our minds go over where great minds

have gone, something that is really fundamental and profoundly requisite for making civilized men.

All the advertising of great works that sets forth glowingly what they will do for those who make their own minds follow through them, that is all true advertising. They will do it. They have done it. What they will do for the individual cannot be exaggerated. It is historically and scientifically correct. The experience of the human race has been just what the advertisers of the great books say.

Into a world of physically vigorous men, who had not done and could not do very much thinking by themselves, came what the world needed most. In the providence of history came those early who loved intricate processes of thought. They thought much and well about themselves and the world; felt the world and admired it. Beyond price and providential in our earliest intellectual inheritance was this: our first masters of thought for our whole western civilization were lovers of philosophy, of poetry, of beautiful things. The first things given the barbarian mind to try itself on was what it needed most. The first intellectual leaders for them to try to follow and to understand were the Greeks. They spread over all the Europe there was then, over Western Asia and Northern Africa. Thousands of people learned to think, and were lifted by that thinking, by following things Greek. Here was a language which to learn and to use, itself put the human mind

to paces it had never struck before. That language carried the great humanizers wherever it went: poetry, tragedy, philosophy, art. It laid the first intellectual foundation of all our western world. Something difficult and fine was given at the first for men to follow after and exercise their wits on. Then came a thousand years of Latin, which became the language and the literature of the western world, all the western world there was. Here again was a language which to acquire gave something stiff to exercise the mind on and that became the language of the world. It carried to men something new, the Roman contribution: administration, politics and law. Then a great theological system was built up. It was abstract, abstruse, closely-knit, logical from its premises, premises which we think now are false. This became the material on which all the minds exercised and sharpened their wits for many centuries.

Then the world seemed not to be getting on and they went back and brought forward again the long lost Greek. Again human thinking was revived under the leadership of Greek minds and again it proved productive. Men were lifted a little higher out of barbarism. What we call the Renaissance was but trying again on all Europe what in a small part of Europe, in Asia, and in North Africa, had done the civilizing and humanizing work centuries before.

We are tracing here the processes that have made men out of beings that were men only in form, but

children and barbarians in mind. We are tracing the past to get the order of procedure and the forces that have done the work. We are going to the past because there is no other place to go. The human race has not lived its future yet and the present is only a line, thinner than a razor's edge.

The order of making men has been thus far: first, a great language which to learn and to use well is itself a mental exercise and a mental triumph. In this language was carried abstract thinking, philosophy, poetry, and appreciation of beautiful things, God-given and man-made. Another great language, the Latin, was the medium which recorded and preserved the intellectual processes of those who were to pace the human mind for a thousand years, through the next two stages, Roman administration and scholastic theology. Here again was a language which to learn and to use required great mental effort, just what was needed most. This language carried to all who could follow it, a great system of world government, political administration and a codified, workable body of law. The same language carried to all who would and could, what men next exercised their wits on for centuries: a great system of moral order for human and divine government. It was a great effort to make men think about all their affairs and their destiny in relation to the great order of God. This held the field until the next great leaders came, the scientific. We are now exercising our minds on what they say we ought to

think and are making ourselves comfortable and productive under their leading. These are the stages through which our minds have come until now and these are the means.

How would it have been if the order had been reversed? Would it have been gain for the scientific leaders to have come first, before men's minds were turned to what the Greeks gave? Suppose this last intellectual leadership of the race had come before the human race had gone through these stages that we have named. Would a scientific leadership for men who had not first been humanized for centuries by these other three processes, would that have been fatal? Can we ever link a scientific spirit to the barbarian stage without disaster? This is the order for our race in the Western world where the most civilizing has been done. Is this order for the race the order for the progress of the individual mind? For making minds today are these the stages: what the Greek gave, and the Roman gave, and the great religious system gave?

When King Alfred wished something to help him civilize his subjects he had these four books translated: The History of Orosius; Consolations of Philosophy; the writings of Gregory the Great and Bede's Ecclesiastical History. These have not been among the best sellers for some time. We should no doubt find much in them that is not true, but we have no doubt that they did much to help King

Alfred civilize his subjects. We suppose that the truth in Homer's Iliad, in Virgil's Aneid and the whole system of theology built upon Aristotle by Thomas Aquinas, which held the world for centuries, we suppose that the truth in all these is surprisingly little. We have no doubt either that a great host of human beings have been greatly advanced as thinking beings by making their minds go over where these great writers led. That these were not true, made no great difference. What was needed was something to try their minds on. Homer, Virgil, Aristotle and scholastic theology are admirable for this, as all can bear witness who have tried them. It was not so much the goal as the going that was needed. These things were dry, hard, abstract; began often with wrong premises and came to wrong conclusions. They did not bring any mind to any point where it should remain, but, they did lead thousands of people into mental effort which the race had not known before and produced literally a new race of human beings. They had to make their minds go to follow after, and by that mental going got what was most needed, the habit of thinking.

For what it may be worth we note here that it is the sober judgment of men, we believe the first-rate thinkers, that the diffusion of a certain kind of learning has twice lifted the world out of barbarism. The benefit was two-fold. One was the exercise from the necessity of severe mental effort. The other was the vivifying, fertilizing, quickening, and

quieting new material for thought gained from that pursuit. It cannot be said that there is nothing better than this for civilizing purposes. It is saying only that the effect on the world of a great and noble language in which is carried the philosophy of things, the poetry of things, and the beauty of things, has been twice to lift the world visibly a little out of barbarism. It taught the world respect for learning, for things of the mind and the great things of the mind, as nothing before had done, as perhaps nothing since has done. It not only set the style for the human mind but also it made the first universities and the first thinking men. It was not very useful learning in the judgment of the man on the street. There was some truth in the witticism that the university is a place in which nothing useful is taught. It was not immediately useful in material comforts. That was not the great need of the barbarian world it went out to lift. It sought first of all to make men go through the process of thinking as an end in itself. With this went, too, increased responsiveness as seeing and feeling beings.

There is a rapidly changing side of life which we call progress. It concerns itself with the changes in dwellings, beds, diet, things to ride in and talk through. It is change. Whether it is race progress, no one knows as yet. There is another part of our life which does not change very much. A little girl holding her doll watched the workmen building the pyramids. A little girl holds her doll now which

she has just purchased at the newest department store. The doll has changed very much; the place in which she buys the doll has changed very much, and what the men are building whom she watches as she holds the doll, all of this has changed very much. The feeling of the little girl has not changed very much. So, young men and maidens telling their loves on the banks of the Euphrates in the long ago, or on the banks of the Hudson today; the concern over their first born; the loves and hates, worries and comforts, all these belong to the permanent, unchanging part of human life. This is the reason why so much of the old experience of men is still of so much concern to us today. On this human side of things there is not much change. On this side of life we are well counseled to believe that nothing which has ever interested living men and women can ever lose its vitality; no language they have spoken; no oracle beside which they have hushed their voices; no dream they have dreamed; nothing about which they ever have been passionate or ever have sought with zeal, can be without meaning to all who come after them. This is the almost unchanging stuff that human life has to work on.

We think it worth while to lift this up here. We would not have it weigh for more than it is worth, but we would have it stand out for all that it is worth. The kind of learning that twice visibly has lifted the race up a stage out of barbarism, has been the kind that concerned itself not overmuch, not very much,

with the changing things—houses, clothes, diet, and inventions—but concerned itself very much with the unchanging things that are about the same from age to age. While the kind of thinking that makes men quietly thoughtful and human has been a great civilizer, and lifted men out of barbarism, the kind that makes men only rapaciously active and acquisitive has plunged the world into barbarism more than once. It often has had to crawl up again. Will the kind of thinking and learning that has lifted it before, help again, or have we found a surer and a better way?

In the individual and the race there is something that comes slowly, surely and with power from the quiet, persistent pursuit of thought. If one can get it out of his own mind, that is good. Most will be led faster, and into more, by following other minds. This is perhaps the most certain humanizing influence thus far in human history.

In some generations it is the style to pursue the quiet, thoughtful things that have been the great humanizers thus far. Now, it is not the prevailing mood and it is not easy to do. In our lives, in our homes, in our institutions of learning and in our churches, it is very easy today to mistake activity and speed for getting on.